



Theory From the South: A Rejoinder

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THEORY FROM THE SOUTH: A Rejoinder

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Authors' Note: We should like thank our dear friends and comrades, Achille Mbembe, Juan Obario, and Charles Piot for having had the temerity to organize the “Authors Meet Critics” session at the 2011 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association (Montreal, 2011) at which these papers, and our response to them, were first presented. It is to their great credit, and to our great benefit, that they were willing to grab a rather wild, wilful text by its tail. We also owe a debt of gratitude to James Ferguson, Srinivas Aravamudan, and Ato Quayson for agreeing to engage seriously with *Theory from the South*. And to do so with obvious critical acuity. It is with a deep sense of loss that we note that Fernando Coronil, our long-time friend, could not take part as planned. In our shared bereavement at the tragic loss of a person of uncommon humanity and grace, of singular imagination and scholarly flair, we dedicate this symposium to his life, his work, his memory.

* * * * *

The conversation among the participants here has already spanned several years, continents, and contexts; indeed, many of their ideas have contributed directly to the arguments made in the book. Our exchanges have always been conducted in a

spirit of empathetic critique, of mutual respect, and of reciprocal, playful vexation – as, gratefully, they were in Montreal. The point of *Theory from the South*, and its even more intemperate under-title is, as Ferguson and Mbembe note, to provoke debate and to raise intractable questions about matters that really count in the world today – at least, if it is to be a world in which the very idea of social science and social theory has any salience; yes, Srinivas [Aravamudan], we plead guilty, without the slightest trace of guilt, to being social scientists, not philosophers. Ours is a time in which society truly does need to be defended; this less in the sense intended by Foucault (2003), for whom there was too much of it, than by our intellectual ancestors for whom the *sui generis* nature of collective facts, of Hegel’s social ethic, had to be established against the reductionist excesses of methodological individualism and economic reason. We agree with Ferguson that, premature announcements of its death notwithstanding, “the social” is actively being refigured in our times as both theoretical and political object; also, that its refiguration is often palpable in places where we have not classically thought to look. But tracking transformations of the social requires that we rethink received space-time configurations, theoretical trajectories, and disciplinary practices, thus to move beyond now well-worn colonial and postcolonial perspectives. The Courage to Do An Anthropology At Large – whatever the risks of failure – is a *sine qua non* of participation in the world of contemporary critical theory. This, we hasten to add, is not to forsake our longstanding commitment to the ethnographic – to ethnography, through thick and thin – or to eschew our perennial encounter with the parochial, the intimate, the experience-near; to be sure each of the chapters of *Theory from the South* is an encounter with

grounded human practices. It is, rather, to open up an argument about our unique disciplinary sensibilities in the face of the Biggest Question of All: how are we to grasp the unfolding history of advanced capitalism – and the world being fashioned by its pervasive, invasive designs – as it takes tangible shape in different places, as it makes real its abstractions and extractions, as it runs up against its own contradictions?

Theory from the South has already given rise to a range of comments, critiques, and conundrums, not just those raised by the contributors to this symposium, but also by others elsewhere. Of the most frequently asked questions posed of the book, four stand out.

The first is this:

What is the status of “the South” in our argument? Given the ways in which we qualify, critique, and deconstruct it, why retain it as a term of use at all? What, indeed, do we actually mean by it?

An initial caveat here in response to a remark made by James Ferguson, speaking of a colleague who dismissed *Theory from the South* as the work of “two white people from Chicago.” Echoes, this, of some of the sillier sorts of self-reflexivity that afflicted the discipline in the 1980s, and of the identitarianism that mistook itself for serious epistemic critique at the time. We are writing neither “for” the south – heaven forfend – nor, simply, “from” the south; in this respect, too, Aravamudan, who accuses us at once of Western epistemological imperialism and a quest for authenticity, appears to misunderstand our position, perhaps derived from his particular grasp of the word “from.” Writing *from* the south, in that sense, is a species of intervention that Raewyn

Connell (2007) has captured under a different label, “Southern Theory.” As Ferguson points out, most of us bear scholarly signatures that are simultaneously north and south. Our critical edges are honed *not* from single placements but from multiple *displacements*, multiple focal lengths, multiple interpellations, multiple movements both away and towards. But that is a side bar. *Theory from the South* is NOT about the theories of people who may be wholly or partially *of* the south, least of all ourselves. Nor is it, as Aravamudan would have us confess, simply theory “about” the south. It is, as Mbembe has stressed, about the effect of the south *itself* on theory, the effects of its ex-centricity, to invoke Homi Bhabha’s (1994:6) term, of its structural and tropic situation in the history of the ongoing global present. Of course, we have long had a species of “theory from the south.” Its other name is anthropology; anthropology, that is, of a certain critical sort. Or, at least, it was – until much of the discipline, seduced by the neoliberal flight from history, society, structure, system, determination, and explanation retreated from theory *sui generis* in favor of contingency and the documentation of difference. But that is another story.

Back to the core of the question: *What is the status of “the South” in our argument? What, finally, do we intend by the term?*

Despite the fact that it has replaced “the third world” as a more-or-less popular usage, the label itself is inherently slippery, inchoate, unfixed. It describes less a geographical place than a polythetic category, its members sharing one or more – but not all, or even most – of a diverse set of features. The closest thing to a common denominator among them is that many once were colonies, though not all in the same

epochs. “Postcolonial,” therefore, is something of a synonym, but only an inexact one. What is more, like all indexical categories, “*the global south*” assumes meaning by virtue not of its content, but of its context, of the way in which it points to something else in a field of signs – in this instance, to its antinomy to “*the global north*,” an opposition that carries a great deal of imaginative baggage congealed around the contrast between centrality and marginality, kleptocracy and free-market democracy, modernity and its absence. Patently, this opposition takes on a hard-edged political and economic reality in some institutional contexts, like the G-8 and world bond and credit markets – a reality that makes it *appear* as though it has a “hard” geo-cartography. That process of reification is precisely why we cannot simply do away with the term by fiat: it has a life in the world. Analytically, then, the problem for a critical anthropology is to account for when, why, and how it takes on that reality. And with what implications. In other words, “the south” is not an analytic construct. It is an analytic *object*. Its very facticity – like its labile relationality and its capacity to signify – is something for which we have to give account. This, to answer Aravamudan, is why it has multiple connotations in our narrative: they refer to different levels of abstraction, different levels of theory-work.

But let us reiterate, lest we be misunderstood. Empirically-speaking, however it may be imagined, the line between north and south is endemically unstable, porous, broken, often illegible. It is not difficult to show that there is much south in the north, much north in the south, and more of both to come in the future. All of which is underscored by the deep structural articulation – indeed, by the mutual entailment – of hemispheric economies, not to mention by the labyrinthine capillaries of the world of

finance, which defy any attempt to unravel them along geopolitical axes. In the complex hyphenation that links economy to governance and both to the enterprises of everyday life, then, the contemporary global order rests on a highly flexible, inordinately intricate web of synapses, a web that both reinforces *and* eradicates, both sharpens *and* ambiguates, the lines between hemispheres. As a result, what precisely is north, and what south, becomes ever harder to pin down. Which is precisely why, as we argue in the book, “the global south” cannot be defined, *a priori*, in substantive terms: why it bespeaks a relation, not a thing in or for itself – even though it can, and has, taken on material substance along certain spatiotemporal axes for certain purposes. *Analytically*, however, whatever it may connote at any given moment, it always points to an “ex-centric” location, an elsewhere to mainstream Euro-America, an outside to its hegemonic centers, real or imagined. For our purposes here, then, its importance lies in that ex-centricity: in the angle of vision it provides us from which to estrange our world *in its totality* in order better to make sense of its present and future.

The second question, which is closely related, is this:

In speaking, however provocatively, of a “counter-evolutionary” moment in the global geo-history of capital, are we not, by a somewhat disingenuous subterfuge, sustaining the telos of modernist narratives, except in reverse? More generally, are we suggesting a historical overdetermination, a directionality, to the history of the present, to the history of capital in the 21st century?

As Quayson and Mbembe both make plain, the quick answer is an unambiguous no, on both counts. But, given Ferguson’s suggestion that we may confuse our readers on this account and may indeed be reversing the telos of modernity, given also that

Aravamudan has it that we are unwilling to decide whether Africa is *either* the end point of contemporary capitalism in its utopic, most advanced form *or* an augury of its most dystopian, degenerate future, let us address the issue head on.

Note here that our central thesis does not hinge, as Aravamudan appears to think, on deciding whether Africa is either one or other of these things. The problem, and our argument, is rather more complex. It is that, while Euro-America and its antipodes are caught up in the *same* world-historical processes, the global south has tended to feel their effects before the global north. There are good reasons for this, reasons both historical and geopolitical, reasons that we spell out in considerable detail in the book. Old margins are becoming new frontiers, places where mobile, globally-competitive capital finds minimally regulated zones in which to vest its operations; where, as Mbembe also reminds us, *capitalism* flourishes as democracy is displaced by autocracy or technocracy; where industrial manufacture opens up ever more cost-efficient sites for itself; where highly flexible, extraordinarily inventive informal economies – of the kind now expanding everywhere – have long thrived; where those performing outsourced services for the north develop cutting edge enterprises of their own, both legitimate and illicit; where new idioms of work, time, and governance take root, thus to alter planetary practices.

In the upshot, the “advanced” edges of contemporary capital – its experiments, among other things, in re-engineering legal and regulatory instruments, in the appropriation of productive land, intellectual property, and other resources, and in the development of new modes of extraction and enclaved sovereignty – root themselves

there; *vide* the fact that, early in 2010, *Newsweek*, not known for its post-racist take on the global economy, declared that Africa is “at the very forefront of emerging markets...Like China and India, [it is] perhaps more than any other region...illustrative of [the] new world order” (Guo 2010:44), a multi-focal order, we argue, whose *axis mundi* is no longer self-evidently in the north. At the same time, and for the same reasons, the dystopian sides of that order have *also* been most readily evident in the global south. Material inequality, human disposability, epidemic illness, social exclusion remain endemic there – which, in turn, have produced more than just “glimmers...of endurance, survivability, and even futurity,” to recall Aravamudan’s phrase. As we take pains to demonstrate, they have also yielded their own forms of politics, their own forms of post-proletarian labor, their own kinds of sociality, their own modes of income accumulation, investment, and distribution, some of them, as Ferguson notes, authored in intricate north-south collaborations. But these collaborations are motivated by conditions in southern contexts, recast in them, and, increasingly, exported northward. In short, as a frontier of contemporary capital, the south has spanned everything from corporate giants like Mittal Steel, Cosan Biofuels, and the Royal Bafokeng platinum empire through experimental enterprises of various scales and reaches, to lumpen life-worlds notorious for their desperate immiseration, their unruliness, their terrifying violence. It has also spawned political fields in which sovereignties are asserted, collaterally and in shifting proportions, by corporations, the state, NGO’s, organized crime, religious orders, ethno-polities, and others. It is the broadsides of this dialectic that we seek to document: a dialectic, we stress, that is under-determined and full of surprises, one that does *not*

recapitulate the telos of modernity or its reverse, one that defies both received Marxisms and Hegelian liberalism.

This is half of our “counter-evolutionary” story. Note that “counter,” here, is intended to mean not just *inversion*, but also *negation*. We deploy it to point to irony, not to teleology. The other half of our story has to do with the contemporary history of Euro-America, one of rising carceral populations, rising unemployment, a rising politics of the belly and the bellicose, spiraling inequality, spiraling crises of social reproduction and generation. It is not we who first noted that the “new normal” of the north appears to be replaying the recent past of the south, ever more in a major key. Which is why, in many respects – note, *many*, not all – Africa, Asia, and Latin America seem to be running ahead of Euro-America, prefiguring *its* history-in-the-making. And why the global north appears to be “going south.”

Even some of the more apparently outrageous claims in this respect are not easily sloughed off. Take the rotting urbanism spreading through parts of the global north. Montreal may not resemble Lagos, as Ferguson rightly says. But large parts of Chicago do. To be sure, Youngstown, Ohio, an all-American wasteland, would actually like to. The point? When, after Rem Koolhaas (Koolhaas and Cleijne 2001; cf. Comaroff and Shepard 1999), we say that Lagos is a hyperbolic frontier of the 21st century connurbation, we do not merely have in mind the fact that real estate on Victoria Island is more expensive than its equivalent in Manhattan. Nor that Chicago has inner city slums little different from those of Lagos. Nor even that the patterns of rampant inequality in the two contexts are running in pathological parallel. We intend, technically,

that urban scapes, as global phenomena, have strongly convergent tendencies – in respect of property relations, political life, patterns of trafficking, claims to sovereignty, local economies, and the like – because of the way that capital, and its cultural mediations, tend to play themselves out under specific demographic, infrastructural, and sociological conditions; conditions that, again, are most graphically visible in places like Lagos. Not everywhere, nor all in the same way – hence, again, our anti-teleological insistence – but in ways that materialize the hydra-headed configurations of contemporary capitalism as it takes its historical course. These configurations, we stress, are ill-captured by terms like “deterioration” or “advancement” or any of the other dualisms that we seek so carefully to avoid in *Theory from the South*.

Which brings us to the third question:

Why, in speaking of “the South,” and of the putative evolution of the north in its direction, do we take Africa as paradigmatic, rather than, say, Brazil or India, the economic success stories of the contemporary moment? Or better yet, why not focus on China, the biggest story of all?

The most immediate answer to this question, raised here by Ato Quayson, is that Africa is the place from which we enter the world; as Ferguson observes, *all* knowledge is situated somewhere. Southern Africa is where we do our scholarly work, where we live much of our lives. Note that “we,” here, already implies a situated deixis, a contextual relativity of person-and-place that captures a central dimension of our argument. Our anthropology, like the phenomena we observe – whether it be the figurations of finance, the politics of life, or the fetishism of memory – take manifest shape in an African locale. But they are also the products of translocal processes and

multiple crossings, of dialectical engagements of varying scale. Africa, to reiterate, provides a fertile forcing ground for many of the most destructively rapacious and the most urgently inventive faces of advanced capitalism. It is *both* a frontier of and a window onto the signature operations of our polymorphous global economy, an economy that has many more-or-less interdependent, quasi-autonomous mutations and emplacements – and no unencumbered centers of Archimedean leverage.

That said, the question is not whether Africa *or* China *or* Brazil is *the* vanguard of the planetary economy. Each makes evident a distinct dimension of the ways in which capitalism at its most energetic is plying its course, seeking to solve its mounting contradictions, exercising its sovereignty over biopolitical life – and running up against its ecological limits. China might indeed have become the workshop of the world. It certainly *is* a critical node in the new global imaginary, one that writes modern history again as an evolutionary narrative, this time with East Asia as its endpoint. But, as its internal crises mount, we must beware of mistaking Chinese capital, however huge its impact on the global economy, for Chinese capital*ism* as a realized formation – which, in its *etatist* form, has generated its own particular character, one toward which the rest of the world is *not* evolving. It has its own dystopias, global dependencies, and contradictions, some of them with palpably African foreshadowings. As Mbembe points out, China and Africa are likely to develop in vibrant symbiosis, both to decenter American seigniorage and to set up new kinds of south-east-south axes. BRICSA, note – the economic alliance of Brazil, India, China, and South Africa – has already been conjured into existence.

To return yet again to our under-title, then, our ironic invocation of Africa here was meant less to argue for a unique harbinger of a capitalist or post-capitalist world than simultaneously to invoke and to dismantle the kind of Hegelian thinking for which Africa has long served as the negative pole; this in order to tell a very different kind of story of the present and future.

Which, finally, takes us to the last of our four questions:

What do we intend here by “theory”?

In part, we have already addressed this. It has been widely noted, in Euro-American contexts, that there has been something of a retreat from theory of late (see above). To wit, a new handbook, currently in press from the British Association of Social Anthropologists (Fardon *et al*, n.d.), dwells nervously on the discomfort of the discipline with general theory of any kind. In the social sciences at large, methodological empiricism and born-again realism have been re-enchanted. There has also been a return to the ethical, the theological, and the biological.

For many in the south, however, the refusal of theory has long been an unaffordable luxury. The need to interrogate the workings of contemporary world-historical processes – to lay bare their uncertainties and invisibilities, to make sense of their ways and means, to comprehend their inclusions and exclusions, to court, counter, mediate their dystopic implications – has become increasingly urgent. Hence the unveiling in 2009 by the Ministry of Higher Education in South Africa of a *Humanities and Social Sciences Charter*, its objective being to prioritize the development of “social

theory” and “critical skills.”¹ What the South Africans have grasped is that the courage to theorize is a prerequisite of any effort to make the history of the future different from the history of the present. If, indeed, the recent past of the south is becoming the “new normal” of Europe, and of Arianna Huffington’s *Third World America* (2010), there is clearly a need in the north for a return to Theory. Perhaps this is a respect in which Euro-America *ought* to evolve more rapidly toward Africa.

By theory, we stress, we do not intend Grand Theory in the high modernist tradition. Ours is not a flight neither into pure abstraction or into a philosophical anthropology. We mean *grounded* theory, *concrete* abstraction: the historically-contextualized, problem-driven effort to account for the perverse patterning of social, material, and cultural “facts” by recourse to an imaginative methodological counterpoint between empirical observation and critical ideation; also, in a different register, between the epic and the everyday. In short, our predilection is for theory that is neither an all-embracing meta-narrative nor microcosmically, myopically local. It tacks, rather, on the awkward scale between the two, seeking to explain phenomena with reference *both* to their larger determinations and their contingent, proximate causes; this by plumbing the complex, often counter-intuitive points of articulation among them (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). As we say in the final chapter of the book, the object of our praxis is to interrogate the connections between what it is that constitutes the lived world and the manner in which that world is experienced, acted upon, inhabited by sentient human

¹ See *Media Statement on the Development of a Humanities and Social Sciences Charter*, Ministry of Higher Education and Training Republic of South Africa, 6 October 2010; <http://www.education.gov.za/dynamic/dynamic.aspx?pageid=310&id=10648>, accessed 7 October 2010. The words from the statement quoted here are

subjects. *Theory from the South* is an argument for just this kind of grounded theory, which, we submit, has always been the stock in trade of a critical anthropology.

A final thought. We began the book by reflecting on the genealogy of enlightenment liberalism, on its presumptions about the subjects and objects of theory-making. All of this goes back at least to Plato, to *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Rancière 2003), to the conceit that there is one class that reflects while others do only menial work. Ours is a different genealogy. For us, theory, particularly critical theory, is immanent in life itself. Which *a/ways* implies a degree of reflection, abstraction, inspired guesswork. In this sense, it need not be an elite practice, even though it is often dismissed as such. To the contrary, theory often derives as much from a lived praxis – a praxis grounded in the ordinary – that may occur anywhere in the “mesh of contemporary wiring,” to invoke the spirit of Walter Benjamin.² Nor, in these wireless times, just “on the ground.” Also in the expansive, immediate, ethereal-yet-personalized technologies aptly termed social media, media that helped congeal a North African Spring – and, following it, a European summer of discontent. These, again for better *and* worse, are rich new sites of knowing-and-being that have the capacity to inform and transform theory at its self-appointed centers. And to trouble its assumptions about the motors, mechanisms, and pathways of history in these, our late modern times.

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Understanding these times, accounting for their lineaments, finally, is the point,

those of the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande.

² The phrase itself is Simon Schama's. He uses it in describing Benjamin's reflections on the obligation to “capture memory” in times of danger through ordinary experience – rather than in the “[fetishization] of the meditative.”

the provocation, the critical pulse that underlies both the poetics and the disciplinary practice toward which *Theory from the South* aspires. Whether it succeeds or fails, or does both in some proportion, the issues that it was written to address remain too important to ignore, too serious to set aside, too weighty to wait.

Afterword

Soon after we wrote this piece for the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Montreal, there appeared a cover story in *The Economist* (December 3-9, 2011) under the banner heading, *Africa Rising*. Among other things, it reported that, over the past decade, “six of the world’s ten fastest-growing countries were African.” In “eight of the past ten years,” it noted, “Africa has grown faster than East Asia,” adding that its rise in productivity easily exceeds that of the USA (p.15). *The Economist* went on to detail the complex reasons for why it is that the continent bespeaks *both* the “transformative promise of [capitalist] growth” *and* some of its bleakest, most dire dimensions. In short, it gives empirical flesh, in a very different register and from a very different perspective, to precisely the argument of *Theory from the South*.

See “Television and the Trouble with History,” Simon Schama, *The Guardian*, 18 June 2002; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,739347,00.html>.

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